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ABSTRACT

One way of giving students a sense of audience in their writing is to combine speech communication and written communication in the classroom. If students can be taught to write as they talk, they can perceive their audience to be real people rather than the amorphous "indefinite other" they typically write for in the traditional writing class. The advantage of teaching students to write as they are taught to speak is that writing permits the recursive process better than speaking does. A sophomore speech and writing course offered at the United States Air Force Academy (Colorado) teaches students how to use spoken language in both their speaking and writing. Each student gives five speeches during the semester, and the assignments require the students to narrate, define, inform, argue, and persuade. For four of the five assignments, the students must write an essay on the same topic as their speech. The course theme is persuasion, so each assignment emphasizes the persuasive nature of speaking and writing. The unified approach awakens the students to the power of spoken language and helps them keep foremost in their minds the primary purpose of both speech and composition--to communicate an idea to people. (HOD)

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# INTEGRATING SPEECH COMMUNICATION AND COMPOSITION IN THE CLASSROOM

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## Abstract

In this paper, I suggest that composition and speech, when taught in the same course, can have a synergistic effect on student communication skills. Speech communication improves writing because it gives the writer a sense of audience and encourages the writer to use spoken language in his or her compositions. Written communication improves speaking because it is a better facilitator of the recursive process, making ideas easier to reexamine and revise. To illustrate how speech and writing can be unified in the classroom, I describe the sophomore speech and composition course we require of all students at the USAF Academy. The sophomore course is one in a curriculum that teaches and reinforces speaking and writing skills throughout the students' four undergraduate years.

In his lead-off article for Ferment in the Field, Wilbur Schramm (1984) commented that it's "illuminating to think of communication as a relationship built around the exchange of information" (p. 15). Such an exchange is relatively simple to illustrate in the speech communication classroom, of course, where the student speaker can see and feel immediate responses to his or her spoken message. If the speaker sees puzzlement, it's time for clarification. If he sees boredom, it's time for more enthusiasm or, perhaps, a lively illustration of a telling point. If the speaker sees rapt attention at an emotional moment, he may want to prolong the moment to achieve "just the right touch."

But what happens in the writing class, where the student doesn't have immediate contact with his or her audience? Those of us who have taught writing using traditional methods know the answer well. The writing is often dull, lifeless, and uncommunicative. And the reason for this dull, lifeless, uncommunicative writing is too often due to our failure to give the student writers a sense of audience--an answer to the question "whom am I supposed to be exchanging information with?" We tell them to write an essay describing a "significant event" in their lives, but

we don't tell them who's interested in knowing about the event. We tell them to write a paper explicating a Browning poem, but we don't tell them who wants to know the meaning of the poem. We challenge them to write a persuasive essay, but we don't tell them whom they're persuading. And we get what we cynically label "the typical student response": dull, lifeless, uncommunicative writing.

If lack of audience is, in fact, a cause of the typical student response, then perhaps giving students a sense of audience is a cure. And a logical way of achieving this sense is by combining speech communication and written communication in the classroom.

The concept of unifying speech and writing is certainly not new. In fact, writing is a derivative of spoken language. In The Presence of the Word, for example, Walter Ong traces the evolution of writing from its spoken origins, lamenting how we have become "abject prisoners" of our literacy. "Contemporary man," says Ong, "finds it exceedingly difficult . . . to sense what the spoken word actually is. He feels it as a modification of something which normally is or ought to be written" (p. 19).

Wayne Booth made a similar point at last year's Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition. Following his plenary address on "Writing as the Making of Meaning," Booth commented that writing and speaking were taught as two parts of a single discipline until relatively recently--roughly

the end of the last century. Booth called the separation of the two disciplines "regrettable for both" (Booth, 1984).

Peter Elbow, speaking at the same conference, suggested it may be time for a reunion between speech and composition. The best writing, said Elbow, is like speaking in several key ways:

--the best writing has a voice: it "speaks" on paper.

--the best writing has involvement with the audience: it extends "an invitation to respond."

--the best writing, like speech, "invites readers to fill-in their own experience and meaning" (Elbow, 1984).

The best writing, in other words, sounds like a person talking to another person.

Writing, after all, is a surrogate for what we'd really like to do as communicators: go "eyeball-to-eyeball" with our audience whenever we have a message to deliver. But of course eyeball-to-eyeball is rarely possible today. So we turn to the next-best alternative: writing. Doesn't it make sense, then, that we teach our students to make their writing as much like talking as possible? And doesn't it make sense that the best way to effect this union is to join the two in the classroom? Rudolf Flesch would certainly answer "yes!" to both questions. "Write as you talk," says Flesch. "Go over what you've written and try to listen to it. Does it sound like talk? If not, change it until it does"

(Flesch, 1972, p. 11). And Ed Bailey, in his latest text, Writing Clearly, certainly agrees:

> You can write more easily, more naturally, if you feel at ease. One way of doing that is to imagine, when you are writing, that you are having a friendly conversation with someone. Then "say the words" on paper as you would say them to that friend (Bailey, 1984, p. 60).

Jane Blakenship and Sara Latham Stelzner suggested just such a union of speech and composition in their 1979 ERIC publication "Speech Communication Activities in the Writing Classroom." In the introduction to their pamphlet, Blakenship and Stelzner commented, " . . . we believe that writing and speaking are conceptually enriched and performance improved and more varied when both activities are taught in the same classroom" (p. 1). The reasons for this enrichment and improvement are many, they say, including:

1. A better understanding of discourse as communication.
2. A fuller awareness of composition as a process.
3. A deeper understanding of source ethos.
4. A fuller understanding of the nature of language and the shared construction of meaning.
5. A fuller awareness of all the possibilities of language.
6. A fuller awareness of the role of interpersonal and group interaction in providing the materials of discourse.

7. A more detailed understanding of the construction of arguments and of argument as process (Blakenship & Stelzner, pp. 1-4).

To these seven, I'd add two:

8. A fuller understanding of the need for spoken language in both speaking and writing.

9. A fuller awareness of audience in both speaking and writing.

If we can teach our students to write as they talk, we are implicitly teaching them to think of their audience as real people rather than the amorphous "indefinite other" we ask them to write for in the traditional writing class. And when they begin thinking of real people reading what they're writing, they begin empathizing, asking, "will my reader understand my message, or must I do more to gain the understanding?" Once the writer begins asking this question, his or her writing will start becoming more lively, more interesting, and more communicative.

So bringing speech into the writing classroom can improve the writing skills, but is there any payback for speaking skills? Does integrating writing and speaking also improve speech skills? Yes, the payback goes both ways because writing allows the speaker to examine her ideas and, in doing so, to discover her thoughts.

Both writing and speaking can be--<u>should</u> be--processes of discovery. Bailey's (1984) description of writing as thinking could equally apply to speech:

> When your brain is actively engaged [during writing], you are not simply transcribing your thoughts. You are also shaping and reshaping them, rethinking, revising, analyzing. To some extent, in fact, you don't really know what you think until you try to write it (Bailey, p. 27).

The advantage of teaching students to write as we teach them to speak is that writing permits the recursive process better than speaking does. What is the recursive process? Simply the process of discovering our ideas by articulating them, reexamining them, and revising them (Bailey, 1984, pp. 26-27). Of course speech permits the recursive process, but writing is a better facilitator because it allows the students--and us--to put our thoughts on paper, examine them, massage them, revise them, and get them into a form that makes sense both to ourselves and to our perspective audience.

Peter Elbow (1984) provides an excellent metaphor to illustrate writing's advantage in encouraging the recursive process. Elbow calls writing "a prosthesis for the mind" because it allows:

> ". . . a letting go, a freeing. And the mind derives meaning from what it writes. Once the idea is written, the mind is free to think beyond, to reexamine."

Elbow reminds us of what George Miller attempted to quantify in 1956: the mind has a finite capacity; it must "empty its contents" often to make room for more ideas. When we speak, of course, we are emptying the contents, but speech alone simply doesn't allow a close examination of those contents, especially not for undergraduate students

who are often wrestling with what are for them new and strange concepts. Even given the increasing use of audio or video tape recorders in speech preparation, writing is still the best way to both empty the mind and to allow a close examination of the ideas. So simultaneously teaching writing and speaking is the most logical approac to encourage the recursive process in speech preparation.

How best to integrate writing and speaking in the classroom is a matter of philosophy, taste, and teaching style. Blakenship and Stelzner (1979), for example, suggest a two-semester approach and offer detailed unit plans covering such rhetorical patterns as definition, argumentation, and persuasion, among others. My purpose here, though, is not to recount the Blakenship and Stelzner plans. Rather, I'll describe a sophomore speech and writing course we offer at the Air Force Academy, suggesting that we have found an integrated approach that seems to work.

First, some context. All cadets at the Air Force Academy must take an English course each of his or her four years. In their freshman year, they take freshman composition; in their sophomore year, they take the course I'm about to describe: composition and speech. In their junior year, they take either advanced composition or technical writing, depending on their chosen major; and in their senior year, a literature course. In each of these courses, we emphasize both writing and speaking skills. In freshman composition, for example, students must read their papers

aloud in class, and their classmates critique the content. In the junior courses, each student must give the class at least two oral reports on papers he or she prepares. And in the senior lit course, we require both oral and written "reaction papers" in which students describe how they react to a particular literary work.

But only in the sophomore course do we completely integrate speech and composition. The goal of the course is to teach our students how to use spoken language in both their speaking and writing. In many ways, the course is similar to a traditional college-level speech course. Each student gives five speeches during the semester, and the assignments require the students to narrate, define, inform, argue, and persuade. But the course differs from the standard course in two important ways. First, for four of the five assignments, the students must write an essay on the same topic as their speech--they deliver the speech one lesson and hand-in the essay the next. Second, our course theme is persuasion, so each assignment emphasizes the persuasive nature of speaking and writing. We use a reader--Persuasive Writing, edited by Karl Zender and Linda Morris (1981)--to show the students model essays that use spoken language to persuade. Of course we also use a speech text: currently, it's the ninth edition of Ehninger, Gronbeck, and Monroe's classic Principles of Speech Communication (1984).

We begin the course with a four-lesson block of review and fundamentals. We spend one lesson reviewing principles

the students learned in their freshman course, especially the spoken style of writing. Then we move to a lesson on delivery, followed by two days of ungraded impromptu speeches.

Our first assignment follows this four-lesson block. In this assignment, we ask the students to deliver a narrative speech and write an essay in which they tell their audience about a significant incident, event, or occurrence in their lives. The assignment essentially calls for a personal essay, but with a twist: we ask them to choose an incident that formed the basis of a belief or feeling they still hold today. As a model, we point them to two essays in Persuasive Writing: George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," and Frank Conroy's "Savages." Both model essays relate events from the authors' lives, and both events were highly significant in forming Orwell's and Conroy's belief systems. The rationale for this assignment is simple: a writer and speaker must first understand how beliefs are formed if he hopes to understand others' beliefs and, ultimately, how to modify them. The best way to gain this understanding is often by examining his own beliefs.

We follow the first assignment with a four-lesson block that covers informative speaking and writing, introductions and conclusions, and principles of organizing the speech and essay. The second assignment, then, asks the students to deliver an informative speech and write an informative essay, but again, a speech and essay with a persuasive

twist. For this assignment, the students have a choice. They may inform their audience about either their particular connotation of a word, or about a particular interest, hobby, or favorite activity. We restrict the students, though, to drawing exclusively from their own experience. For example, one of my students this semester defined for us his connotation of the word "communism." He told the story of his grandparents, who were peasant farmers in Korea when the Korean War broke out. After their farm had been overrun by the North Korean Army, the author's grandparents refused to give their enemies food and aid, so the grandparents were thrown into a North Korean prison. I'll let the student tell the rest of the story:

> That night my grandparents spent their first night in a communist prison. My father visited them as soon as he was able to and was shocked at what he saw. His parents were beaten and had not eaten in days; their parched lips and swollen faces showed the effects of the cruel beatings, but they never gave in. Never did they complain to my father of the pain that they were in. "Run away!" was the only thing my grandfather was able to whisper to my father. The torture and lack of food had weakened him to a point where he was almost dead. . . . Russians? The McCarthy era? These are not the things that come into my mind when I think of communism. I think of my grandparents and of how I was never able to meet them because they died in a communist prison.

After assignment two, we have two lessons of individual conferences, then we begin the second half of the course, in which we concentrate solely on persuasion. We begin this half with four lessons covering audience analysis, argumentation, reasoning, and Monroe's "motivated sequence" technique for organizing persuasive messages. We then move to

the semester's third assignment, which requires only a speech. First, we tell the students they must pick a topic that they want to examine in the final three assignments. We place only a few restrictions on the topic selection: it must be controversial, relevant to us, and interesting to them. For assignment three, then, they must find a persuasive speech or essay on that topic, edit their selection to meet a time limit, and deliver their selection in class from a manuscript. Besides giving the students the chance to practice speaking from a manuscript, this assignment also encourages them to find a model for their final persuasive assignments of the semester.

Following the manuscript speeches, we have two lessons covering the use of supporting material and documentation. Then we begin the fourth assignment, which requires a persuasive speech and essay in which each student must argue the side opposite her own belief. For example, if a student has chosen gun control as her topic, and if her belief is that we need greater controls on the private ownership of handguns, in assignment four she would argue <u>against</u> such controls. We make the rationale for this assignment as clear as possible for the students: one must first understand the opponents' positions if he or she hopes to persuade an audience.

Finally, the course's fifth assignment challenges the students to put it all together: deliver a speech and write an essay in which they attempt to persuade their audience to

accept their belief on the topic. Actually, "accept their belief" is somewhat an overstatement of the assignment's goal because we emphasize the assimilation-contrast theory of Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall (1972). To use the language of the theory, we challenge the students to widen their audience's "latitude of acceptance"--to persuade the audience that the advocated position is an acceptable one. Our goal here is to show the students that persuasion is often a slow, step-by-step process, but that, approached patiently, even the most hostile audience can be won over.

We don't pretend that the approach we use throughout our curriculum--unifying speech and composition in the classroom--is a panacea for all the ills of student communication. Some people might argue, in fact, that in trying to teach both disciplines at the same time, we do justice to neither, and I can't offer any empirical evidence to refute that charge. I can say with confidence, though, that we're now seeing more lively, engaging, and persuasive writing and speaking among our students than we have ever seen using traditional methods. What's more, the students are enjoying the courses. Intuitively, the unified approach seems to work.

The longer I teach, the more convinced I become that acquiring good communication skills is more a matter of maturity than education. Our hope is that, as the students mature during their four undergraduate years, we can at least steer them in the direction of speaking and writing

that is interesting, engaging, and communicative. And the longer I teach, the more convinced I become that a unified approach to writing and speaking is the way to turn the helm. The unified approach awakens the students to the power of spoken language and helps them keep foremost in their minds the primary purpose of both speech and composition: to communicate an idea to people.

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